DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 046 RC 021 755

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TITLE	Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-98-1
PUB DATE	1999-01-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002012
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348; phone: 800-624-9120 (free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Children; *Economically Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *Homeless People; Housing Deficiencies; *Poverty; Rural Areas; *Rural Family; Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Policy; School Role
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Student Support Services

ABSTRACT

Despite stereotypes to the contrary, homelessness is as prevalent in rural as urban areas. This digest examines the implications of homelessness for rural children and youth and discusses possible actions by rural educators. An estimated half of the rural homeless are families with children. Compared to urban counterparts, rural homeless families are more likely to be female-headed households and to rely on family and friends rather than social agencies. In addition to lacking physical housing, homeless children are deprived of the emotional security that a home provides. Homeless children may be barred from school by residency requirements or missing records, and may struggle in school due to transience, emotional problems, poor nutrition, poverty-related health problems, domestic violence, or self-destructive behaviors. Homelessness is increasing in the United States as the income gap between rich and poor widens, child poverty increases, and housing costs rise. Schools can address the problems of homeless children by reconsidering attendance and other policies, providing in-school support for projects, and holding professional development workshops that help teachers identify and serve homeless children. Rural educators should compile information on local services and resources available to homeless families and may establish informal support mechanisms. Public policy involvement may be the best long-term strategy for educators. (Contains 10 references and 6 resource organizations.) (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

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EDO-RC-98-1 January 1999

Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools

by Yvonne M. Vissing

Rural homelessness is as prevalent as urban homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). It differs markedly from its urban counterpart. This Digest considers (1) the challenge of homelessness in rural areas, (2) the meaning of homelessness for rural children, (3) the educational problems of homelessness, (4) causes of rural homelessness, and (5) remedies and resources for rural educators and human service providers.

The Challenge of Homelessness in Rural Areas

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997, p. 1), "Studies comparing urban and rural homeless populations have shown that homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time." Vissing (1996) estimates that half of rural homeless households are families with children, both two-parent and single-parent families. She also suggests that female-headed households are about twice as numerous among rural, as compared to urban, homeless (32% vs. 16%).

Exact national figures are not available because 1990 census data on the homeless are doubtful, especially for rural areas. The census enumeration relied on the assumption that the homeless would be found in shelters. However, few shelters exist in rural areas. Even where shelters exist, rural homeless people favor other options because of shame and pride (Garrett, 1996). Vissing (1996) reports that instead of relying on social agencies, rural homeless people move in temporarily with family or friends until they get back on their feet: 41% in rural areas versus 11% in urban areas.

Homelessness, then, arguably presents a more pressing challenge for rural than for urban educators because of the higher rate of homelessness involving families and children. But it receives far less attention, either from national media or from rural education and social authorities. Most available resources have been developed for the urban context.

What Homelessness Means for Rural Children and Youth

Vissing (1996) uses the terms *housing displacement* and *housing distress* to describe rural homelessness. She defines rural homelessness as "lack of a consistent, safe physical structure and the *emotional deprivation that occurs as a result*" [italics added] (p. 8). In rural areas, extended families are sometimes able to take in homeless young families. Abandoned houses can sometimes be occupied for free, but the availability of electricity, heating, and water supplies may be doubtful.

Housing shelters humans from the elements, but homes provide more. The social construct of *the home* describes the physical and emotional space needed for sustaining a private life. In educationally relevant terms, homelessness deprives children of the security they need to be themselves. Rural homelessness, which undermines the conditions of learning, is just one of many serious threats that poverty inflicts on children's ability to learn (Children's Defense Fund, 1998).

Educational Problems of Homeless Children and Youth

A diversity of people with possible rights to elementary and secondary educational services comprise the homeless: young children, single teenagers on their own (e.g., pregnant teens, teen parents, runaways), and young adults (Kryder-Coe, Salamon, & Molnar, 1991). Failure to provide *appropriate* educational services for these people magnifies their misfortune and frustrates the growth of their intellectual capacities.

Just enrolling homeless children in school and ensuring their attendance can be difficult. Residency requirements bar homeless children from attending school in 60% of the states (Vissing, 1996). Other obstacles to admission include missing health and education records. Seventy percent of the states report difficulties getting records of homeless children who transfer to their schools. Often, homeless children need to be reimmunized. These obstacles are falling in many places, but the rural situation is unclear.

Although many homeless rural children continue to do well in school, transience, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil strongly undermine success. Many, perhaps most, homeless students will develop physical, behavioral, and emotional problems including post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and anxiety.

Existing health problems may go untreated, and the stressors of homelessness inevitably produce new health problems. Transience may disrupt the task of preparing and serving regular meals. Quantity and quality of food commonly suffer as well.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997), rural as compared to urban homelessness involves more prevalent domestic violence but less substance abuse. These trends probably reflect the elevated rates of family homelessness in rural areas.

Profound emotional troubles accompany homelessness. Some children feel guilty, as if they were the cause of their families' poverty. They may also resent their parents for not being better providers. And they may actively resent other students, teachers, and administrators for not understanding homelessness. Self-destructive behaviors and psychic numbing are common. Homeless children may act out to get needed attention, but withdrawal is more common. Suicidal tendencies increase with homelessness, as do incidences of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Vissing, 1996).

Children usually hide their homelessness. Among all others who interact with children, teachers are in the best position to identify problems unobtrusively. They observe their students carefully from day to day.

Causes of Rural Homelessness

Some observers (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1990) note the persistent belief that the poor exhibit bad genes, poor planning, weakness, and overall lack of discipline and worthiness. According to this view, the moral fiber of the nation is decaying, and the character of the family is one victim; the poor reveal themselves as the worst citizens and the worst people, though it is important to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor even in this explanation (Katz, 1990). Rural educators should understand that this concept may characterize conventional wisdom in many traditional communities (Garrett, 1996).

Among many educators, an economic argument offers a

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more acceptable explanation. Homelessness is increasing, according to this argument, in part, because the income gap between rich and poor in the United States has widened substantially in recent decades. Measured in constant dollars, the *poorest* one-fifth of all families had incomes 9% lower in 1996 as compared to 1973. But incomes for the *wealthiest* one-fifth of all families rose 35% (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). The gap between rural and urban incomes is also widening, with the rural percentage of the average urban income falling from 78.5% in 1980 to 72.8% in 1990 (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1998).

Child poverty is also increasing. The Children's Defense Fund (1998) reports that while the median income (in constant 1996 dollars) of U.S. families with children stayed level at $41,000 from 1976 to 1996, income for childless families rose 18% over the same period, and income for young families (parents under 30) sank 33%—from $30,000 to less than $20,000. The child poverty rate in young families doubled between 1973 and 1996, from 20% to 41% (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). And, in rural areas, child poverty rates are reportedly higher than in urban areas (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1998).

As the rural poor get poorer, the proportion of income claimed by housing goes up. By the standards of the 1950s, 20% of income constituted a normal housing expense. In the 1970s, the official standard was raised to 25%. Today, the standard is 30% (Vissing, 1996). But the poor spend a larger proportion of their income on housing—often twice as large. Fitchen (1981) suggests suburbanization has driven up the price of housing for the rural poor. As new residents move in, rural land and housing prices increase along with taxes. The supply of inexpensive housing shrinks, and new residents seek to increase housing standards. This process makes it difficult for the rural poor to live either in make shift housing or mobile homes.

Remedies and Resources

Practical strategies and a review of successful programs to help the homeless are available from organizations listed in the Resources section, or through publications like those of James Stronge (1992), which overview successful programs to help homeless students. Again, adaptations from the urban context should be considered critically.

Schools and districts must consider the appropriateness of policies with respect to homeless children. Most absentee policies and attendance penalties fail to acknowledge homelessness as a possible condition of students' lives. In a logical and practical sense, having a home is a prior condition of schooling. Homeless students need plenty of lead time for projects, and they should get in-school support for projects with which parents usually help (e.g., entries for science and social studies fairs). Professional development workshops could help teachers more easily identify impoverished rural students and address the challenge of serving them well in the classroom.

Knowing where to turn for help is important. Administrators in rural areas where housing distress and displacement are common should make sure that teachers, counselors, nurses, and other administrators can find local resources. A handbook or an easily accessible computerized database that describes agencies and services is essential for those who want to help homeless students.

Immediacy is the key for serving homeless students because their living circumstances can be truly dire. School personnel should have access to information that describes options for emergency shelter, long-term housing support, food and clothing assistance, social services, employment, legal counsel, medical and dental care, mental health services, emergency financial assistance, and transportation. All the details of life are usually disrupted when families become homeless. Single teenagers are likely to exhibit the most needs.

Although formal support is thin in rural areas, some services exist everywhere. Rural educators may want to commit energy to establishing informal support mechanisms. They will be pioneers.

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Resources

Several organizations specialize in programs for the homeless.

Health Care for the Homeless Information Resource Center
Policy Research Associates, Inc.
262 Delaware Avenue
Delmar, NY 12054
888-439-3300, ext. 246
Web site: http://www.prainc.com/hchi/

Interagency Council on the Homeless
451 Seventh Street, SW, Room 7274
Washington, DC 20410
202-708-1480
Web site: http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/ich.htm

National Alliance to End Homelessness
1518 K Street, NW, Suite 206
Washington, DC 20005
202-638-1526
Web site: http://www.naeh.org/

National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
c/o Louisiana Department of Education
654 Main Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70801
504-342-3431

National Coalition for the Homeless
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, #600
Washington, DC 20005
202-737-6444
Web site: http://nch.ari.net/

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
918 F Street, NW, Suite 412
Washington, DC 20004
202-638-2535
Web site: http://www.nlchp.org/

The ERIC system has developed a number of Digests that address urban homelessness. The digests may provide some examples or contacts of possible utility in rural schools. Search for them using "homeless" at the following URL: http://ericae.net/search.htm#Dig. Or you can call ERIC/CRESS at 800-624-9120 to request a free search.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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